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Black to White: Small Projects, Big Impact

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Impact

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BLACK TO WHITE

Small Projects - Big Impact

Essay by Noel Brady

In 1994 the interior improvements and exterior façade treatment of Black's Pharmacy in Monaghan won for De Blacam & Meagher an 'Regional Award' (the RIAI's annual *Irish Architecture Awards* former title). The same practice is the focus of the Irish Pavilion at this year's Venice Architectural Biennale. In the intervening years, they have completed a number of significant commissions, which have in turn influenced a new generation of Irish architects to pursue architecture in spite of the challenges of practice. Their mews house in Heytesbury Lane (*Regional Award 1998*) was followed by the Wooden Building (*RA 2001*), interventions to Maynooth Keep (*RA 2002*) and the monumental Cork Institute of Technology (*Irish Architecture Award 2007*). The developments arc mirrored the bubble of the economy. While there is no denying the necessity of housing, heritage and schools, one can certainly question the level of exuberance that finds us on the other side of the bulge.

The RIAI awards have been an interesting metric against which practice, wealth, ambition and mere activity could be measured. With more than 50% of the Irish building stock built in the last 20 years, architects have contributed to this significant statistic by adding new and significant landmarks as well as preserving our older structures. What is interesting is the development of younger and smaller practices during this period of unprecedented exploration. Unlike previous economic expansions, the numbers of architects, newer practices and an active migrant workforce made for a dynamic working environment. For the first time in over a decade, young graduates could remain in Ireland filling the gap left by those who had emigrated in the 1980s. The environment also encouraged ever-younger practices to get started, leading to a rapid increase in levels of innovation, in particular in private residences.

Caught between the twin traps of growing families and increased purchasing costs – as couples who could not afford the increase in stamp duty let alone the ever-increasing house prices worked with what they had – architects were commissioned to excavate additional space by whatever legal means that transcended the limits of site, tectonics, planning and cost. These challenges were grist to the mill, forcing clients to accept non-standard thinking and new vistas. With television programmes underwriting this new home improvement agenda it became easier to accept new ideas outside of tradition. Gradually the default no longer applied.

Outside of individual houses, innovation was less obvious (often for good reason). While size of project is used to measure a firm's capacity, it is not necessarily the most accurate metric to judge design skill. The home, and in particular the interior, features heavily in the work of Irish Architects. For years individual architects and small practices have mined a living from the repair, refurbishment, extension, conversion and enlargement of the Georgian and Victorian residential landscape of Dublin.

In recent years, houses of a younger vintage were included as part of 'lifestyle makeovers'. The small-scale project,



Now is the time for bold decisions, not reliant on the passive acceptance of tradition.



often commissioned by a family member or friend has been enough to launch the career of many a young architect, confirming the importance of access and opportunity in the marketplace. The Carmelite monastery, London (Niall McLaughlin/Andrew Williamson, RA 1996) or the insertion to the National Sculpture Factory (Tom de Paor, IAA 2002) or the Extension to Tom's Bar, Co. Laois (Architecture53Seven, IAA 2002) illustrate the breath of imaginative thinking available at this small scale, each heralding a new voice. The concentration of thought shown in work as Kitchen Garden Party Wall (Donaghy + Diamond IAA 2006) or in One up – One down – One deep (A2 Architects IAA 2008) confirm that physical or financial restrictions are no hindrance to the application of design intelligence.

For the client who is brave, the rewards outweigh the risks. There have been few corporate clients who have shown similar courage. The presence of a creative response is easily recognised in work like the 11m2 Extension to Victorian House by Hassett Ducatez Architects (IAA 2001) where the demands of privacy in a highly built up area inspired the choice of an opal glass screen. This became the architectural theme for the extension, seductively photographed at dusk to further its eerie presence. But in truth these works are a search for autonomy, an effort to excavate a piece of ground upon which to stand. This leads inevitably to an issue of contrasts, where the old and the new sit beside each other. The extent to which this is resolved varies but is often disguised in official publications through selective use of photographs. In the recently completed Lake House (Clancy Moore Architects, IAA 2009) the existence of the Georgian Country House to which it connects is barely hinted. In other projects the contrast is heightened as seen for example in 14 Ormond Road (Boyd Cody IAA 2003), Stacey House (FKL Architects IAA 2002) and Museum at Mellifont Abbey (McGarry Ni Eanaigh Architects RA 1996).

It should be clear that this is a call for the strategic development of a small works strategy at national level. McGarry Ni Eanaigh have utilised this early experience in developing strategies to deal with important human and social agendas. They have successfully navigated the space between the small-scale house and larger public works as have others like McCullough Mulvin and Grafton Architects. Many of these practices have established an International Reputation on the back of intimate works and competitions. This hard-won experience has made it easier for every new graduate, with many setting their target on becoming the new O'Donnell + Tuomey. In order to develop, architects must build using the smallest of works to make an enquiry into the nature of space and tectonics. In the Parson's Podium Grafton Architects (IAA 2006) used a Siza/Snozzi like strategy, which has informed more recent work such as the new offices for the Department of Finance at 7-9 Merrion Row (IAA 2008) which develops a more local investigation of surface articulation. FKL Architects similarly used the opportunity of a small library as an essay in complex folding

and tube construction, (Baldoyle Library & Local Area Office IAA 2004) becoming the basis for further explorations in architectural form and construction.

In 1983 Michael Graves said: "kitchen extensions beget kitchen extensions". At the time Graves's had gained international notoriety for flamboyant surrealist neo-Corbusian house additions. It is clear from the above that, at least in Ireland, house extensions have proven to be the fertile ground from which greater work is possible. It would appear that at the end of 'the great expansion' (the boom), we may find ourselves in less experimental waters. In 2009 the award for best house went to a stark white and aluminium house; 10A Grangegorman Villas (ODOS Architects). This was not the first abstract building construction in Dublin but it is amongst a few that made little attempt to blend in. Many of the early works by Irish architects sought a more conversational approach to the problem of context with essays in brick and timber or render. In the last decade, materials that had been previously rejected were now acceptable, such as fibre-cement, stainless steel and aluminium cladding. The end of the property bubble has been hard on every aspect of architecture practice from the largest to the smallest. Many of those let go from larger practices have opted for the uncertainty of private practice. The correction we are experiencing may mean a return to more modest thoughts.

In recent years, new practices have emerged with a distinctly different flavour. The boom saw the immigration of young architects from all over the world. Some were journeymen (and women) architects collecting experience as they came and went but others set down deeper roots. Practices such as Ryan Kennihan (*Winner of the RIAI/Dublin City Council Henrietta Street Infill Competition*) and Architecture Republic (Maxim Laroussi, Javier Buron & Jean-Baptiste Astruc) illustrate the international character of this new development. Whether from America (Kennihan) or Morocco via France (Laroussi), it is a valuable opportunity to open up the architectural discussion to new creative and inventive works. Now is the time for bold decisions, not reliant on the passive acceptance of tradition. We require more design intelligence at all levels of our society. One way to encourage this is to provide more access and opportunity for everyone to play a role.

The Plastic House by Architecture Republic is the lantern that illuminates one potential future. It sits probably as far as possible from Black's Pharmacy. The black polished Irish Limestone of the pharmacy's façade, which identified with place and a certain tectonic gravitas is set against the Plastic House, which challenges the notion of house itself, becoming for a time a temporary art gallery. The very material challenges the fabric of living and the regulations designed to protect people from the unknown and untested. A brave attempt to explore new materials, which have the possibility of altering the very fabric of living.